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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how 13 Swedish preschool student teachers and one preservice leisure educator discussed their thoughts regarding their professional work, their life histories, and their ongoing studies in special education. What unified them was their professional education, which was based on their own participation. This project examined the processes that participants were going through in order to acquire knowledge during their studies in special education. The paper reviews the different expressions of silence that emerged from participants' discussions, looking at questions that emerged (e.g., when they became silent and why they became silent). Results indicated that, among other things, men and women had strong role models. Participants discussed what their voices meant in regard to others' voices, how social and cultural factors influenced them as they developed, what dialogue was (and on whose conditions it occurred), interpretations and definitions of the surroundings, where knowledge came from and whose voices were heard, and whose voices were suppressed. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)



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Mutual Closeness and Mutual Critical Scrutiny –
Some Notes from a Participant-Oriented Research Process.

Eva Siljehag

April 2001

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When do we become silent and why do we become silent?

Mutual closeness and mutual critical scrutiny – some notes from a participant-oriented research process.

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Abstract

In my paper I describe how thirteen pre-school teachers and one leisure teacher have contributed with thoughts of their own from interviews and group discussions concerning their professional work, their life history and their ongoing studies in special education. What unifies them is their type of professional education, which is based on their own participation. My research project attempts to reach an understanding of the processes that the participants are going through in order to acquire knowledge during their studies in special education. In this paper the questions and the different expressions of silence that have emerged from discussions are to be reviewed and developed. Questions that have emerged from the discussions are "When do we become silent?" and "Why do we become silent?".

Introduction

As a result of previous work with participatory research, partly within the framework of research circles during the years 1997 – 1998 (Härnsten & Siljehag, 1998) with people from various professions from the comprehensive school, issues about how we understand the concept of knowledge were raised. It emerged that the views of what knowledge is and how it is acquired varied greatly amongst the teachers, pre-school teachers and leisure teatchers. It became clear how two different traditions of acquiring knowledge failed when it was necessary to define clearly exactly how knowledge was produced or reproduced.

The issues above were discussed simultaneously during the time I studied as a graduate and later for a Master's degree at the Institution for Special Pedagogy (ISP) in Stockholm 1994-1997. The experiences that were gained as a



result from work for one of the major essays with a phenomenological perspective (C-uppsats, Siljehag 1996) at ISP made me realise the potential of incorporating participants' own experiences in a research effort. In another major essay "From chaos to creation" (D-uppsats, Siljehag 1997), I reviewed the work together with some teachers, preschool teachers and leisure teachers in a research circle. The conclusions from the latter were further questions about traditions and processes of acquiring knowledge.

All this above mentioned work, together with the questions that occurred during my time at ISP, inspired me to further develop and strengthen a practical- and experience-based knowledge, together with a research method that heavily involved the participants.

Since the Spring of 1998 I have participated in a working party within the Special Pedagogy course, which is a postgraduate course. Here I have had the opportunity to develop further the issues raised in previous work in a dissertation. The core of my work for the essay is fourteen students, thirteen studying to become pre-school teachers and one to become a leisure teacher. The special pedagogy course is a pilot project with the aim of deducing new procedures for teaching at ISP. The focus of the course is, according to Gunilla Härnsten who is senior lecturer and project manager of the course at ISP, to break away from the current understanding of knowledge and how it is applied in teaching at the majority of the educational institutions in Sweden today. Currently, this application means that knowledge is transferred solely from the more knowledgeable, the teachers, to the less knowledgeable, the pupils. The aim of this project is therefore to try to deduce whether the adult students' own skills, experiences and problems can be a starting point for an institutionalised course such as teaching degree courses in the Swedish higher education system. The research that we conduct aims, amongst other things, to find and analyse the possible requirements for using the experiences from the mature students' own lives during their education.

The research until now

As part of the pilot course, all 32 participants have had the task of reflecting over their future role as special pedagogues through three exercises. The exercises are as follows: autobiographical work, analysis of the type of sector in which they might work and, finally, literature studies and attending lectures. In this paper the 14 participants of my research project and I attempt to construe our experiences regarding *silence* and simultaneously reflect over which knowledge-acquiring processes take place during that work.

A result of the meetings with the 14 participants was a will to work with the autobiographical aspects in more detail. The second round of interviewing was therefore focused on the members' own reflections which they wanted to share with the research group. I will start to outline the theoretical approaches that have inspired me during my work and also put forward the resulting thoughts from the participants. I end with discussion

Why Autobiographical Work?

During the interviews with the participants we were asking ourselves what we wanted this for. What can we come up with and what does it mean for us as teachers?

Pierre F. Dominicé, professor in higher education for adult students at the University of Geneva has for many years been working with teaching approaches and autobiographical approaches with respect to the education of adult students. Autobiographical work requires research from each participant and Dominicé regards them during this process as authors and artistic creators of their own work. The point is that no pre-defined theory or method influences their approach and enables the participant to find their own way and a range of solutions. According to Dominicé, personal questions, resources and terminology can be defined through the process of oral and written analysis of a problem. The participants can identify personal patterns and values in their own words and deduce events that are important to them (Dominicé 1990). In his latest book, "Learning from our lives", Dominicé underlines the importance of not interfering with the student's interpretations and writing. The narratives belong to the 'world of interpretation'. The process of contructing the narratives is a process of interpretation. (a a s132). If this is interfered with by questions regarding interpretation for example, the student may struggle in describing his or her personal experience of education due to a lack of words or definitions. Hence, a crucial part is to let the



participant have the possibility to develop their own words in describing their thoughts and experiences regarding their own early personal education. This exercise enables them to come to terms with their own learning.

Karin Widerberg, professor of sociology, discusses in her book "Gender and Knowledge" (1995) the need for feminist research to break with the discussion regarding the male dominance of our society and its definitions of truths, objectivity and knowledge. Because it is only an expression for 'what I say is important', a language of power which is also used to exercise power (p 123). Widerberg has analysed how she has acquired her knowledge using two approaches: closeness and experience. She uses "closeness" as a starting point and a goal and explains that the closeness gains substance or energy from experience. Widerberg applies this by asking: what happens with our production of knowledge if we develop these issues as concepts of closeness instead of concepts of distance?(p122). Here closeness aims to examine our different ways of learning by using and understanding our experiences. Frigga Haug (1987) discusses the importance of closeness and becoming precise. She is a German feminist and trained sociologist and says that work with our own memories is important in order to gain understanding of our life experiences. Haug argues that we accept and mimic the traditional view of difference in gender. We therefore have to become definite and use the banal and informal of our everyday life. The definite and concrete gives closeness as well as distance to ourselves according to Widerberg (1995) who also points out that women might not be quiet but communicate in a harmless and inoffensive way.

Which role model influences us in the creation of our experiences and our language? The Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith discovered that sociology and its terminology were mainly characterized by men. In her book "The Every Day World As Problematic" (1987) she describes how "one can approach the subject from another perspective" by analysing the relations and connections that exist between people at different levels within a society from the perspective of our own everyday life. If we can analyse such relations and connections, we can gain an understanding of its structures more generally. It opens up the possibility of exploring these relations as they really are, of discovering how they work and how they enter into the organisation of the local historical settings of our work and experience and of our encounters with others. (p 134). The book is inspiring as it is seen from the perspective of Special Pedagogy and also because of its comprehensive view regarding Special Pedagogy. I ask myself, How do we approach Special Pedagogy? Who defines it and from which perspective is it defined? From whose perspective are we approaching and judging children, pupils and parents?

Hence, at which stage does the critical scrutiny of the above emerge? At which stage are we prepared to express ourselves in another way than that described by Haug as "harmless and inoffensive"?

Gunnar Sundgren, professor in Pedagogy at the School of Higher Education of Mälardalen outside Stockholm, argues in his book "Knowledge and Democracy" (1996) "...that the understanding of the link between pupil, teaching and school is an issue of delivering knowledge respectfully to the pupils as defined by science." (p 62). What the pupils are meant to learn is defined by the curriculum, where it is described in terms of concepts brought from science and not every day life. Sundgren therefore proposes that our approach should be based on knowledge related to the conditions of everyday life and how that then can be further analysed, applied and eventually changed. This approach, Sundgren continues, will always be a question of analysing dilemmas and will force us to make a stand due to its dependence on human values rather than on traditional analysis of the problem. To analyse a dilemma is, according to Sundgren, "...to analyse the comprehensive view, gain an understanding of it and your self in relation to a broader situation and the demands it imposes on us." (p 94). In this manner unanticipated solutions can perhaps be discovered from the central dilemma, which for Sundgren means establishing a dialogue with the situation.

In the Committee for the Education of Teachers' final report (1999) "To teach and to lead", the committee discusses the production of knowledge and its processes. Our new programme in Sweden for the education of teachers aims to satisfy the students' needs in terms of personal learning, stimulate the understanding of learning processes and give skills in teaching. The concept of knowledge production should be interpreted as the meaning of collective learning that aims for research and the acquirement of new knowledge. The committee argues that new knowledge can be acquired through other means than systematic research, such as through the analysis of everyday life, thus contributing to widening human knowledge. This is a knowledge that creates knowledge from the point of view of its own interests and activities which take place in a local and personal learning.

Dare we apply issues on equal terms and are we able to?



Britta Wingård, lecturer in Pedagogy at the School of Higher Education for Teachers in Stockholm, discusses in her thesis "Being Lecturer and Woman" (1998) women's different ways of teaching by studying work of some female American researchers (Belnky et al., 1986). Wingård develops the outcome of this work in her anthology "Todays whispers – Tomorrows yells" (2000). The American women define five different ways of teaching and Wingård then relates that to her thoughts about management of people and organisation. One important aspect of the work of the American researchers is that a traditional way of teaching should not be in the shape of a ladder, but a range of ways that can be integrated by both men and women. However, the investigation showed different standpoints for different groups of women.

For the type of teaching that Wingård summarises under her heading "Constructed Knowledge", she draws the attention to what she calls "real speech" which seems to be a condition for the development of exactly this type of knowledge. "Real speech" is, according to Wingård, careful listening that enables the creation of a situation where ideas can emerge and be developed. This definition of "real speech" is hence not what the constructivists understand as didactic speech which means not wanting to share one's experiences to gain understanding. Wingård's definition of "real speech" is what the constructivists call a conversation where results from explorations, questions and arguments are shared. Given this background, Wingård proposes an organisation led by a management team composed of small groups where confidence and trust should be developed in parallel with a democratic leadership style. This type of leadership should be build upon the experiences of all group members, such that new theoretical approaches can easily be incorporated and further develop teaching.

How can we stop being silent? Is it possible to create a new collective identity and legitimacy built of real conversations where the range of experiences and knowledge can be identified and clearly expressed? Within the participatory research there are documented cases where silenced voices have been able to regain a position of influence in society. Participatory research aims to enable weak and suppressed groups in society to gain influence by supporting them in an attempt to change the social situation.

Orlando Fals-Boda and Muhammed Anisur Rahman (1990) define this research method in three independent steps. The method is experimental and can, in the context of further education, be research-orientated and raise social and political issues. Also, the method describes an individual and collective way of working in everyday life. Here, academic researchers and participants work together such that experiences and commitments can be analysed in order to understand how knowledge has been gained and how it can be used.

The feedback is central for the researchers in participatory research. The author Rahman (1990) argues that participants should be approached in such a way that they can speak with confidence. Hence, this researcher is required to possess inter-personal skills. The point is that the participants should be given the possibility, based on their individual requirement, to develop their own way of communicating. Communication can be achieved through a range of media such as technology, music, art, body language etc. The benefit of this approach is that everyone can be part of the process at any given time. Here, the researchers can prioritise what is appropriate, define how it can be publicised and how others can use it. The outcome of this experimental and theoretical knowledge is hence transferred from "common sense" to "good sense" or what he calls critical knowledge and refers to the Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci.

These thoughts, developed as a result of being in the role of the researcher and through the interaction with the participants, become interesting when we try to define the fundamental approach to our research method and its purpose. So far, the bulk of the effort has been devoted to developing a sensitivity as to what this research method, largely based on the contribution from the participants, means and how it can be described. The development of an understanding of what an experience represents and how it has emerged is important. There are still many interesting discussions to be held. Patricia Maguire, American feminist and sociologist, worked, in her words, "with" her female participants as opposed to "on" them, an approach that enabled the women to reflect on each other's experiences. In her study "Doing participatory research" (Maguire, 1987), she describes how her work with a group of abused women with children enabled them to rediscover their potential. The women could break free from their identity of being abused mothers and were, by the end of the project, able to see themselves as just mothers. The process of reaching this result was interesting but also painful.

What do the participants say themselves?



Here, I attempt to reproduce some of what the participants said during our meetings and summarise resulting experiences. This is followed by a discussion.

What my voice means in respect to others'

During an interview Magdalena, one of my participants, wondered: Does my individual past as a story mean anything when working with broad and general issues? This question is very important when approaching our past experiences. Magdalena also wondered why writing down her past experience in education was important. Important for Magdalena were her reflections regarding her teenage daughter in relation to her own past as a teenager. We discussed our common experiences regarding how our own mothers had approached us and how that has come to influence our relationship with our own daughters. I then brought forward the relatively sensitive issue, in response to the above, that our perception that our past is not worth listening to is being transferred to our daughters. I asked: Should we pass on to our daughters this idea that we think our past is not worth mentioning in relation to broader and more general issues? What is influencing our past more than our approach to it? Are we only to look at ourselves to find elements that should be changed or can they be found elsewhere? How can our knowledge about entirety and Special Pedagogy, held by us as educated women, be used when we assess ourselves? Magdalena pointed out the possibility of approaching her past experiences from a male as well as a female perspective.

How do social and cultural factors influence us as we develop?

What you want is one thing, what you should do another, and what you have to do is different again. This is a quotation that influenced another of my participants, Siv, and her mother, when she grew up on a farm. Where it came from in the first place is not clear but it inspired Siv's mother to start studying full time as a mature student. This decision made an impression on Siv. I was brought up by my mother, who cleaned everything; from floor to ceiling, everything. But suddenly she stopped doing it. I do not remember exactly whe,n but it had to do with the birth of my younger siblings. It had to do with the concept of 'what has to be done has to be done'...but somehow the arrival of the new family members forced my mother to change. This forced change enabled her to see that she could do other things as well and she started to study...Hence she had to reduce the work at home, I mean there just wasn't enough time, and I was brought up in this manner. I mean I was brought up in a situation where I as a woman believed in myself. This crosses my mind every now and again...

The work that Magdalena carried out on her life history and on gender issues in pre-school made her reflect on how we are influenced by our upbringing. The tradition tells us what to do, was Magdalena's experience when she analyses the expectations that her family had on her and which she did live up to. She realises that her mother's values influence her both as a mother and as a professional. She develops: Deep inside I wanted to be the good little girl. Maybe I didn't really want to pierce my nose as I did. I wanted to rebel, that was the thing, but at the same time I am strongly influenced by her (the mother's) values.

Gunnel, another participant, reflected on how our upbringing influences the way we approach life. Gunnel, who was brought up in the countryside, describes how she was expected to help out with the work. She and her brothers were expected to carry out different things on the farm, something she does not see as a problem. The less important, but still necessary, things to do Gunnel mentions: That's the way it is in the countryside; it came naturally. One should do something even if the work to be done was not outside... it was an issue of feeling that one made a contribution. That is important, that is. To feel that what one does makes a difference and that one is not pretending.

What is dialogue? On whose conditions?

What are our needs, how do we show that we have them and how are we being approached by our surroundings? These were the questions I asked myself after the work carried out above. Who makes us silent?

Some of the participants in this project choose to be silent in order to demonstrate the type of needs they want to satisfy. Eva, another participant, chooses to be silent when she feels that a conflict is about to arise. She opts for silence when a conversation is moving quickly, even if she thinks that what others say is wrong. Careful preparation is her way of ensuring that her voice will be heard. She also remembers being silent when she was small and visiting her grandparents, but at the time it was seen as something good. She was supposed to be silent as a child and listen when her grandparents had guests. She says: Yes, it was interesting listening to what the guests had to say! Yes, it was fun listening to and watching adult conversation. I know I thought that... that it was interesting having people around, but it was fun when there were fewer people around.



Katrin, another participant, talks about how she found it hard to communicate her own thoughts and experiences to a group of people. She compares this with the way communication takes place in her Special Education course where the lecturers enable "dialogue" with 32 students. During lectures in the Special Education course lecturers discuss things with a group of a few people only, over and over again. The thoughts of this group are not necessarily the most interesting... what is the result? What is communication and what is dialogue?

The interpretations and definitions of the surrounding

Siv remembers as a result of work with her life history how she became silent during her years in pre-school because her teacher misinterpreted her. The teacher accused Siv of making ugly Christmas decorations. She was hurt and decided not to respond to her teacher anymore as revenge. This was a difficult experience for Siv, and her son and daughter have experienced the same thing during their time at pre-school. Her daughter responded as Siv did while her son became agitated instead.

Anneli, another participant, was according to her surroundings defined as shy. She started to speak relatively late but remembers being active and outgoing. She was often up to mischief. Despite her outgoingness she remained silent during school time and only spoke when she was asked something. She stresses that it was the classroom that made her silent, not the school as such. During the breaks, she was back to her normal self again. Similar experiences apply to another participant, Anne. As a professional teacher, Anne continues, she explains how she "very discreetly added my knowledge" during her everyday interaction with colleagues. She and her colleagues have discussions together but even here she uses her "silent" way of displaying her knowledge regarding issues related to pre-school pedagogy.

The silence can also become apparent when certain perspectives of knowledge are excluded as they are in the traditional environment of schools. Mats, another participant, reflects over this: Action plans are often developed from the perspective of only one profession. This was an experience that Mats gained when he participated in a working party whose members were from different professional backgrounds. Clearly, this misrepresented perspective included only the prevailing traditions of the particular school and the values of the specific group members. The knowledge that is brought by the pre-school pedagogues and leisure teachers is not welcome, contributed Mats, another participant. This type of knowledge was regarded as not being part of what is generally perceived as important to children and pupils.

From where does knowledge come from and whose voices are heard?

This question was raised by Mats and by Ameli. She used her experience of applying cultural tools that she learned to use during her years at a Polish school in order to make her voice heard. She and her fellow classmates were trained by their teachers to learn the treasures of literature by heart and then to analyse and question them. The result of this work was according to Ameli: ...to, with the aid of fellow students, discover what it was that I really wanted to say. In Poland the first thing that teachers set out to do is to understand the individual abilities of their pupils. That is good. Otherwise the children are cheated. Then they can write freely.

Suppressed voices, where do they hide?

As a drama teacher at the Polish school where she worked, Ameli often used poems, painting and drama. This type of work enabled her and all her pupils to listen to all voices. It was very much appreciated by the pupils but at the same time Ameli was surprised by the fact that her colleagues did not acknowledge or comment on what the pupils achieved. During the meetings I had with Ameli we discussed Russia's suppression of Poland and how Ameli experienced that during her years there. Maybe this suppression was what fuelled the need for analysing and understanding the Polish national culture. She continues by comparing with Sweden:

In a country where one doesn't feel suppressed...there one might think differently. I mean, here everything is free! Here, there is no need to conceal what one wants to say. It is just a question of listening and taking in what others are saying. There is no need to conceal or transform words. But in Poland there was censorship and we were all social communists and the leading party was made up of communists. It was because of this that the [need for] culture was so strong. It was as if we had forgotten about a lot of that. And it was as a result of that that people needed to think about culture in order not to forget it and to work hard not to forget other treasures. I think what happened was that one developed a membrane around oneself that allowed some things and not others. But then, when the membrane is taken away, it was possible to discover other values.



But isn't it the case that all of us conceal and transform our words? What kind of external control is imposed on us? When Anna attempts to define the Swedish school as the death of culture, that question enters my mind in the production of this paper.

Discussion

Who makes them quiet? Is it us working in education? What kind of approach is taken towards acquiring knowledge within our educational system? In my introduction the start point of the pilot course is outlined – to break with the current hopelessly static approach to the acquiring of knowledge! Is it this type of approach to knowledge that silences the participants of this research project? Are we silent within the education system?

The thoughts and experiences of the participants resulted in a *gender perspective*. This gender perspective showed amongst other things that men and women have strong role models. People who are related or close often become strong role models. These role models, who are often relatives or just very close, remain as a source of inspiration because they have taken a stand for equal rights or set a good example in difficult situations. There was also the experience of choosing further education instead of taking care of the family on a full-time basis. It also emerged that there were considerable difficulties in self-development and the breaking of routines due to gender-orientated traditions. The autobiographical work showed that these gender-orientated traditions are still being transferred from generation to generation today. One participant's discovery of this phenomenon made her ask herself what it really was that influenced her and how she related to this issue.

How do we approach our job today? Are we prepared to apply our experiences from management and teaching issues as seen from the gender perspective? Will that make a difference for our children and pupils in pre-school and school? Are we unconsciously adopting traditional approaches and thinking even today?

When do the participants become silent and why?

The participants of this research project have talked about their experiences of becoming silent in order to explain the impact of the *relations* and *variations* that appeared to have caused this silence. Here, the word "relations" is used to refer to those between certain teachers and those between school and family. Further, "variations" means the difference between approaches to boys and girls now and in the past, and between different approaches to knowledge.

From whose perspective do we judge and make priorities? Is it during the interaction between the educational institution and the establishment that the participants become silent?

Is it their experiences with different educational institutions that have trained them to become silent? How do we as trainers of teachers view the educational institution that we work in ourselves? Are we contributing to the silence of the participants? Do we as teacher trainers become silent ourselves, and if so, when?

Is "real speech" between different groups of people such as teachers and trainers of teachers within the educational institutions possible? Who has the authority to judge such "real speech"? What kind of processes and relations enable "real speech"? Is it possible that every individual voice can produce "real speech" in his or her own words? What kind of content and questions does this produce? What do we want to know more about and what makes us curious? How do we make our collective curiosity apparent? What kind of knowledge production do we then find? Can we put this into words that are not "harmless" or "inoffensive"?

Epilogue

I have in this paper attempted to define some of our collective processes with the focus on the questions regarding the experiences the participants have of silence. A lot of work has been done between us but it feels as if we are just starting. That perhaps shows the dynamic and complex nature of knowledge processes. Frustration and feelings of failure are often the result of this process due to its complexity and inertia. Often it is difficult to find even a small section of common ground within the vast area of traditional approaches and voices. However, the common ground that has been defined will not disappear because we have become aware of its presence. Are we willing to explore together more common ground in the vast landscape of gender and knowledge issues?



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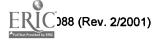
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